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SUBJECT: COM CALLS ON SLOVENIA'S MINISTER OF PUBLIC
ADMINISTRATION, GREGOR VIRANT

1. Summary. On February 10, COM called on Dr. Gregor Virant, Minister of Slovenia's newly created Ministry of Public Administration. Virant described his ministry as a consolidation of human resources, information management and eGovernment initiatives into one, central, transparent, and service-oriented unit. He listed his priorities as removal of administrative barriers for both citizens and businesses; development of eGovernment with a special focus on government-to-business services; development of a high-quality human resources operation, following successful corporate examples; and above all, a transparent and open administration. Virant is currently shepherding controversial amendments to the law on Public Administration through Parliament. He also described plans for creating an expert council made up of business and government focused on creating a "business friendly" administrative environment in Slovenia. End Summary

NEW MINISTRY, NEW LAWS, "REINVENTING GOVERNMENT"

2. Ambassador, accompanied by DCM, Pol/Econ Chief and Pol Specialist, met Virant just after his first session with the parliamentary committee overseeing public administration. Virant described the session as long, but useful. He was very glad of the opportunity to correct some misperceptions raised by articles in the press and recent National Council (upper house of parliament) objections to the amendments to the law on Public Administration. As Virant described it, while the law does bring the political process down one layer further into the bureaucracy (down to the USG equivalent of Assistant Secretary level), it will not result in forced job losses. Rather, it allows new ministers to place people of appropriate qualifications, and in whom they have trust, into positions of importance within the ministries. Incumbents will be offered the option of a position of similar rank elsewhere in the ministry or a severance package. The new appointees will be vetted by the same Civil Service Council as all other hires for suitability and qualification for the jobs. The current law draws the appointee line at the USG equivalent Under and Deputy Secretary levels.

3. In response to Ambassador's queries about the creation of the new ministry and the planned simplification of bureaucracy, Virant explained that a Ministry for Public Administration had long been "dreamed of," and, now that it was a reality, he was confident, (with a civil service of around 34,000) it could function along the lines of a successful corporation. He stressed a desire to be more business-friendly and invited the Ambassador's views on how he might be able to accomplish this. COM explained that he heard credible complaints from both Slovene and U.S. business people regarding a lack of transparency for those wishing to establish a new business. In addition, the whole tender process for public procurement was often lacking in transparency with winners seen to be predetermined. DCM added that the Embassy had received complaints about the lack of transparency and inconsistency of tax administration in Slovenia, to which the Ambassador added the suggestion that the language used for informing the public on tax issues be clear and understandable to the average citizen. Virant agreed that these were all areas where the GOS could improve its service and expressed interest in USG experiences in "re-inventing government." He responded favorably to the suggestion that he engage with the American Chamber of Commerce in Slovenia and speak at one of the Chamber's monthly breakfast events.

CORRUPTION

4. On efforts to combat corruption in government, the Ambassador praised the new practice of financial disclosure for public officials, noting, too, that Slovenia has received many accolades from the OECD, EU and others on its overall strategy to prevent corruption. COM asked how, in light of the work it does and the domestic and international value placed on its work, the void would be filled if the current Commission for the Prevention of Corruption were disbanded as

has been suggested in recent press reports. Virant responded by stressing that there was no formal initiative to disband the Commission, but there was thought being given to transferring its oversight duties for financial disclosure to a parliamentary committee. Virant also suggested that he would like to change the name of the law for the prevention of corruption to more accurately reflect its goal. He would call it the "Law Regulating the Obligations and Restrictions

of Public Officials." He said the Freedom of Information Act would also be amended this year in order to make this information more widely available.

15. Virant asked the Ambassador about U. S. experiences in the realm of public corruption. COM described the Office of Government Ethics, which has become a respected institution and viewed as a key element of a transparent U.S. government. He emphasized that though an onerous requirement, all high-ranking public officials in the USG appreciate the importance of public financial disclosures.

COMMENT

16. Virant, who served as a State Secretary in the Ministry of Interior in the previous government, is clearly enthusiastic about his new position and is losing no time in consolidating his ministry. He is pushing for changes he believes will create a more efficient and transparent civil service bureaucracy in Slovenia. While being clear about the need to conform to EU standards, Virant was very open and frank in his discussions with the Ambassador. He seemed genuinely interested in U.S. experiences in government reform and receptive to our views about possible reforms in Slovenia. We will take advantage of his openness to put the local AmCham leadership in touch directly, and we will also seek opportunities to offer Virant greater exposure to U.S. management and leadership models.

17. BIO NOTE. Virant was born 04 December 1969 in Ljubljana and holds a Ph.D. in law from Ljubljana University where he is also a senior lecturer. He speaks fluent English and has studied at Glasgow Caledonian University.
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